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Polysemy, or What Counts as a Distinct Sense: Metaphors in Japanese Sign Language

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ABSTRACT

Previous examples of polysemy in Signed Languages are found in Shimada (e.g., CRY vs SAD in JSL) and Johnston & Schembri (e.g., TEA vs COFFEE in Australian Sign Language). Their analysis reveals, as seen in Figure 1, that their phonological forms look similar. However, the issue with those discussions is that there is no specific analysis on how those examples are able to be considered as polysemy. This is known as polysemy fallacy from a cognitive linguistics approach, that is the lack of principled criteria for determining what counts as a distinct sense.

Traditionally, polysemy is understood and explained as any linguistic form that has similar phonological forms and has more than one meaning. It can also be epiphenomenal, a single relatively abstract meaning from which others senses are derived. However, from a cognitive linguistic perspective, polysemy gives rise to lexical ambiguity as polysemy is a conceptual phenomenon. In semantics, polysemy is unlike homonymy. It is a category of distinct polysemous senses and represents lexical organization at the mental level.

This study aims to provide linguistics analysis on the ARGUMENT IS WAR metaphor in Japanese Sign Language through a conceptual metaphor lens. There is an issue with distinguishing between polysemy and vagueness. To answer this, the key is to find lexical ambiguity thought lexical iconicity. Secondly, is to use Evan & Tyler's theory of principled polysemy and semantic network analysis.

Based on analysis of iconic mapping for the sign lexical iconicity, we will compare the signs FIGHT and ARGUING. Both signs have the same handshape, however, FIGHT is based on visual images of two fighters who are holding a long thin object and crossing their weapons while ARGUING is based on two disputers and they are engaged in a disagreement. Not only the handshapes but the relationship of hands in a spatial relationship provide a distinct sense. This would be initial evidence for distinguishing between senses stored in semantic memory. As for the second evidence, there would be a rough radical network for index-finger as a long thin object as the central sense.

(TEA vs COFFEE in Australian Sign Language) (SAD and CRY in Japanese Sign Language)

TEA, CUP,
CUP-OF-TEA, CAFÉ

SAD and CRY

Figure 1